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ABSTRACT

Both the speaker and hearer of a conversation can make use of ambiguity to achieve their special purpose in a given situation. The strategies stemming from pragmatic ambiguity offer distinct advantages to speakers and hearers. When dealing with ambiguity, linguists have concentrated on the source of ambiguity and how to analyze it. References to ambiguity among pragmaticists, however, has been sporadic. Strategies of ambiguity include deliberate ambiguity as well as intending two meanings simultaneously. These strategies, especially the second, are frequently adopted by creative writers to form word play. A third strategy, invoking words or phrases with both a literal meaning and an idiomatic meaning, are used commonly by joke tellers and humorists. Strictly speaking, this strategy is deceptive in nature. A fourth strategy involves openly meaning one thing by hoping to communicate a second, more hidden meaning. Besides these strategies for speakers, the hearer can achieve a particular communicative goal through pragmatic ambiguity as well. Examples from "The Silence of the Lambs" and "Roseanne" demonstrate how a listener can act as if an offensive utterance was actually ambiguous, thus forming a tactful response. In these ways, ambiguities, which at first seem to be defects of language, in fact offer the speaker and hearer a number of strategies for meeting particular communicative goals. (Thirteen references are attached). (HB)

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AMBIGUITY CAN BE PRAGMATIC, AND A GOOD THING, TOO

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Weiser (1974, 1975) demonstrates that both the speaker and hearer of a conversation can make use of ambiguity to achieve their special purpose in a given situation. There seems, however, to have been little work done in this line of inquiry since then, and I intend to offer a more complete account of pragmatic ambiguity in this paper. Besides supporting Weiser's claim that ambiguity can be intended by and advantageous for both the speaker and the hearer of a communication encounter, I will show that the strategies stemming from pragmatic ambiguity and advantages these strategies offer the speaker and hearer go far beyond what Weiser discusses in her works on the subject.

When dealing with ambiguity, linguists seem to have concentrated on the source of ambiguity and how to analyze it. It is believed that ambiguity is either lexical or structural. In their widely-used textbook, for example, Fromkin and Rodman (1988:210-212) painstakingly distinguish ambiguity resulting from homonymy (e.g. <u>She cannot bear children</u>) and ambiguity resulting from different underlying structures (e.g. <u>to screw in a light bulb</u>). This view is present in most, if not all, textbooks

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(Simpson 1979) and references (Crystal 1989).

Relating to the lexical and structural nature of ambiguity, previous research has tended to use semantic analysis to disambiguate lexically ambiguous sentences and resorted to transformational grammar to disambiguate structurally ambiguous sentences. The assumption in this line of research is rather obvious: because language has homophones lexically and different deep structure can be realized in the same surface structure syntactically, ambiguity is something the speaker wants to avoid but cannot. It is therefore a defect of language.

While saying that ambiguity has been largely an object of study for semanticists and syntacticians, I do not mean that pragmaticists are not aware of this phenomena. However, reference to ambiguity in pragmatics has been no more than sporadic allusions. Thus, Cutler (1974:121) speaks of ambiguity in the interpretation of ironies. Davidson (1978:32) talks about how metaphor is not a case of ambiguity. Sag and Liberman (1975) discuss ambiguity of speech acts and how to disambiguate it through the intonation of the utterance. Levinson (1983:330-331) shows that ambiguity can also result from the sequential location of the utterance in the conversation. While these authors show that ambiguity can be pragmatic, they seem to maintain, as those who treat ambiguity semantically and structurally, that ambiguity "will confuse and delay h's [the hearer's] interpretation of the sentence" (Leech 1983:67, see also Wardhaugh 1985).

The only authors I know of, besides Weiser, who believe that ambiguity can offer advantages to the language user are Grice

(1975) and Brown and Levinson (1987). I will give them credit when it is due.

Pragmatic ambiguity is here defined as ambiguity resulting from a particular communication encounter which is intended by the speaker and/or hearer for a particular communicative purpose. This definition has the following characteristics. First, it differs from Weiser's definition of deliberate ambiguity, that "the speaker is uncertain as to which of the two states of affairs holds for the addressee [and] does not want to speak so as to presume one or the other true, but does want the situation to 'carry forward' (1974:724)." Weiser's definition concerns only one situation where ambiguity is intended. My definition includes Weiser's situation and more, which will become clear in what follows. There is still another difference: Weiser's definition does not include the hearer, assuming that ambiguity can be advantageous to the speaker only, while my definition includes the hearer as a user and beneficiary of ambiguity, assuming that she, just as the speaker, can utilize ambiguity for her own purpose.

The second characteristic of this definition is that it supersedes both lexical and structural ambiguity. Since the essence of pragmatic ambiguity is intention and situation, it can be lexical and structural as well as situational, as long as it is intended by one party and perceived as such by the other. This, again, will become clearer when particular strategies are discussed.

Conceivably, a pragmatically ambiguous utterance can have more than two interpretations. For sake of convenience, however, I will only speak of utterances which have two interpretations only. I will call these two interpretations A and B.

From the vantage point of the speaker, she has at her disposal the following strategies.

Strategy 1: "The ball is bounced to you, hearer." This strategy is equivalent to what Weiser (1974) calls "deliberate ambiguity." It refers to situations where the speaker is not sure "which of the two states of affairs holds for the addressee." Therefore she uses an ambiguous utterance that holds for both situations so as to help herself avoid a communication crisis. Weiser uses several examples to illustrate this strategy, one of which is as follows. A young woman has been escorted home by a handsome policeman after he has rescued her from some danger. She would like to ask him in for a drink, but she would shock him (Ma'am! I'm on duty!) if she asks him directly. However, she will never know if she does not ask. So she says: "I probably shouldn't ask you in for a drink." Since this utterance is ambiguous between being a statement and an indirect invitation, the police man will not be shocked or insulted, because the young woman is not asking him for a drink at the literary level. The advantage of this strategy is obvious: whichever interpretation the hearer acts on, it is within the speaker's intention. By such ambiguous utterances, the speaker forces, so to speak, the hearer to choose between the

two interpretations, thus freeing herself of the risk of creating a crisis.

Strategy 2: "Hit two birds with one stone." This strategy refers to cases where the speaker intends both A and B. It differs from the previous strategy in that it does not require the hearer to disambiguate. Since this strategy has the advantage of being economical with words, it is much favored by advertisements, TV shows, poets, and fiction writers. The following is a list of slogans from various commercials:

Bayer pain reliever: "There is no pain you can't Bayer (bear)."

The Discover card: "It pays to Discover."

Shoes: "It feels good to walk on your own feet, especially when your shoes don't hurt."

Natural gas: "Air pollution is a problem hanging over all of us."

The Church of Scientology (refuting an attack by Time): "The story that Time cannot tell."

John Deere lawn mower: "Nothing runs like a Deere."

Names of TV comedies frequently make use of this strategy. Thus we have "Family Matters," "Davis(') Rules," and "The Wonder Years." Other TV broadcasters and anchors also resort to this strategy. For instance, when the 1988 Republican presidential slate became known, New York Times named its cover story "A Quail in the Bush." Last February, ABC named its news segment "A Primary Source" when reporting the results of the New Hampshire

Primary. A sports commentator said "Blues had a Capital win" when reporting a hockey game between the St. Louis Blues and the Washington Capitals, and ABC's Good Morning anchor referred to a college course on teenage drinking as "a sobering lesson."

This strategy is also frequently adopted by creative writers. The word game in "The Most Dangerous Game," the title of one of Richard Connell's short stories, refers to both the sport of hunting and its prey. The word recreation in Audre Lorde's poem "Recreation" implies that the sex act is recreational and entertaining and that it remakes its participants. Blake's lines "Never seek to tell thy love/Love that never told can be," according to Grice (1975, quoted in Martinich 1990:157), is a case of double ambiguity: "My love" refers to either a state of emotion or an object of emotion, and "Love never told can be" may mean either "Love that cannot be told" or "love that if told cannot continue to exist." Since there is no textual evidence for the reader to decide on one interpretation over the other, the reader has to assume that both meanings are intended by the poet.

Examining the linguistic sources of this strategy, we find that they cover homophones (Bayer and bear), polysomies (primary and game), use-mention distinction (Time and Discover), and the distinction between the literal meaning and the idiomatic meaning of an expression (hanging all over us and walk on your own feet). These various kinds of ambiguities provide an opportunity for the speakers to intend both meanings of the word in a given situation

without having to use two separate words or even utterances. This is why we cannot help offering an appreciative smile at the "cleverness" of such utterances when hearing or reading one.

Strategy 3: "Seeming to aim at B but shooting A." This strategy is mostly used by joke tellers and humorists. In terms of its source, it rests primarily on words or phrases which have both a literal meaning and an idiomatic meaning. Consider the following exchange:

A: Boy! Was I in hot water last night.

B: What happened?

A: I took a bath.

The phrase "in hot water" has a literal meaning and an idiomatic meaning. It seems that when such phrases are used, their idiomatic meanings are more likely to be the intended ones, perhaps due to ages of use. Therefore, when A says that he was in hot water, B takes A to mean that he was in trouble. However, A surprises B by taking the less plausible meaning of the phrase as the intended meaning, hence producing the comic effect.

Another example runs like this (from Reader's Digest). A Missourian was driving southward. Before he reached Mississippi, he saw a billboard which read: "Mississippi dead ahead. Last chance for 28 cents gas." He exited and pulled to a gas station, telling the serviceman to "fill it up." Sitting in his car, he asked the serviceman: "How much is gas in Mississippi?" The service man answered: "24 cents." The humor here results

from the fact that "Last chance for 28 cents gas," under normal circumstances, would mean B, that gas beyond this point would be more expensive. However, it can also mean A, that it would be less expensive. The designer of the billboard seems to mean B while in fact he means A.

Sometimes the speaker makes more obvious effort to set up such a "trap." A Volunteer against Illiteracy commercial claims: "The only degree you need is a degree of caring." By using the two meanings of the word degree, the commercial writer makes sure that the reader, when reading the first part of the utterance, think about academic degrees. Then she uses the same word to mean something entirely different, thus successfully conveying her message that no degree is needed to volunteer.

In the strict sense, this strategy is deceptive in nature. However, this type of deception has at least two advantages. First, since the speaker wants the hearer to detect the deception, the hearer does not feel deceived. In the above example, for instance, we as readers do not feel any anger. Instead, we marvel at the commercial writer's dexterity in using language. Second, since the speaker employs ambiguity, she can always defend herself by shifting the blame onto the hearer, arguing that "That such and such normally means B doesn't mean that it cannot mean A. You took it to mean B, and it's your problem." Thus, you can be nasty towards your office mate by starting the following conversation, but still be able to defend yourself:

You: I have a dinner party tonight. Are you free?

Office mate: Yes. I'd love to come.

You: Ha Ha. Bad luck. You're not invited.

Strategy 4: "Hand you A but sneak in B." In other words, this strategy enable the speaker to openly mean A but hope that B will reach the hearer's subconsciousness. For example, a gas commercial claims: "No heat is cheaper than gas." This text is structurally ambiguous, meaning that the state of having no heat costs less than gas, call it A, and that gas is the cheapest form of heat, call it B. The advertiser can always claim that she means A, but it is conceivable that she would very much like her audience to believe B. If we take it to mean B, that gas is the cheapest heat and find out later that electricity is cheaper, we cannot sue the advertising agency for making a false claim, because the agency can simply say that they meant A, that the state of having no heat is cheaper than gas.

When reporting the House Bank Scandal, ABC's Prime Time Live named its segment "Checks and Balances." While the segment was solely on the bounced checks and overdraws by some of the Congressmen, its name makes the viewer to think about "checks and balances" of the American political system.

While the speaker can use pragmatic ambiguity to manipulate the communication encounter, she is not the only party who can benefit from it. The hearer can also achieve her particular communicative goal through pragmatic ambiguity. There are primarily two strategies available for her.

Strategy 1: "Tit for tat." This strategy refers to situations where, when faced with an ambiguous utterance, the hearer says things which will satisfy both states of affairs, thus preserving the ambiguity of it. I will use an example in Weiser (1985:657), but revise it to illustrate this strategy.[2] Suppose I am interested in a colleague of mine, say Cindy, but I know that she is seeing somebody else, say Jack, who works elsewhere. Our department is having a party tonight. I know Cindy is coming, but I do not know whether she is coming alone or with Jack. In order to find it out without appearing socially inappropriate, I say to Cindy: "I understand you're coming to the party tonight." This utterance is open to two interpretations: "I understand you alone is coming" and "I understand you and Jack are coming." Obviously, I am using the first strategy for speaker discussed previously, namely, "The ball is bounced to you, hearer," hoping that Cindy's reply will disambiguate. Faced with this, Cindy has to make a choice as to which interpretation she should act upon. Since she is not sure which interpretation is intended, acting on either one will risk being rash. Therefore, she says: "Yes. I know you're coming, too. See you there," which provides no indication whether she is coming alone or with Jack, bouncing the ball right back to me, the speaker.

Strategy 2: "You give me a lemon, I make it lemonade." This strategy is what Weiser (1975) calls "selection by reply." It refers to cases where the hearer chooses to act on interpretation B while it is clear that the speaker intends A. One of her

examples is the following exchange"

A: Who told you?

B: Don't worry, my information is accurate."

In the movie, "The Silence of the Lambs," the heroine Clarice Starling goes to see Dr. Lecter, who is confined in a psychiatric hospital. When she meets the hospital director, Dr. Chilton, she finds out that the socially unlikable director shows an obvious sexual interest in her. He says, after commenting on Clarice's attractiveness, "So the FBI is going to the girls like everything else, ha, ha!" Because she has to have Chilton's cooperation for her mission, Clarice cannot afford a head-on collision with him. She therefore deliberately takes this unwelcome utterance as a positive comment on FBI's effort on affirmative action, replying "The Bureau's improving, Dr. Chilton. It certainly is." The essence of this strategy is that the hearer purposefully treats an utterance as ambiguous, although it might not be intended by the speaker as such, then acting on the interpretation that is to her own benefit, thus avoiding undesirable consequences for herself.

After interviewing Dr. Lecter, Clarice meets Chilton again. This time, Chilton makes his intention more obvious: "Is there some place I could call you in Washington for a follow-up, later on?" Clarice replies, "Of course. It's kind of you to think of it. Special Agent Jack Crawford's in charge of this project, and you can always reach me through him." Here she uses the same strategy, taking "follow-up" literally, thus successfully

avoiding Chilton's intention of starting a relationship with her.

This strategy is also frequently used for comic purposes. The following exchange is from the TV comedy, Roseanne:

Roseanne: John's always on my back for more children.

Jacky: He'll get it right next time.

where the hearer deliberately interprets the phrase, "on one's back," literally while it is clear that it is intended metaphorically.

Similar to this, we have the following exchange:

Employee: Has my proposal been carried out?

Boss: Yes. The janitor did it a moment ago.

Comparing the ambiguity strategies available for the speaker and the hearer, we find that the former has more than the latter. This is natural in that the speaker has more control over the direction of the conversation than the hearer. Since ambiguity is built in language at all levels: semantic, structural, and pragmatic, the speaker has a great freedom to make use of it for her particular purposes. In order for the hearer to manipulate the exchange through ambiguity, however, the hearer's utterance has to be at least potentially ambiguous. In other words, one can make lemonade from lemon, she cannot make it from, say, stone.

I hope I have demonstrated that ambiguity, although a defect of language at first sight, offers both the speaker and hearer a number of strategies for particular communicative ends. However, while saying that ambiguity can be a good thing, I of course do

not mean that it is always a good thing. If you invite one of your opposite sex colleagues for a working lunch, please make your intention unambiguous, especially if he or she has some interest in you.

Notes:

[1]I thank my colleague Christopher Johnson for his invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[2]I am aware that the line between ambiguity and vagueness is very thin. A good discussion of the difference between ambiguity and vagueness can be found in Binnick (1970).

[3]The original example in Weiser demonstrates how the hearer can "select by reply," which is what I discuss as Strategy 2 for the hearer below. Weiser is not aware of the strategy I discuss here.

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